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LABOR-MARKET WAGES FOR PRISONERS

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National Swedish Correctional Administration

The debate in recent years on the treatment of criminals in Sweden has often dealt with the importance of work activities in the treatment of prisoners. Sweden now has increased resources for work activities, giving them a privileged position. During the 1960's the number of institutions was greatly increased and the remaining older institutions were improved. Modern factory premises, workshops and study halls were set up so that today every prisoner is offered productive work, study opportunities or vocational training.

The debate has been dominated by what share of the treatment program should be allocated to productive work, whether work should be compulsory or not, what form remuneration should take, what influence the prisoners should have in their work situation and how cooperation with the labor market should be arranged.

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The idea that productive work be part of the daily routine has never really been questioned. However, there have been differing opinions on how this work should be planned so as not to intrude on other correctional activities such as studies, theoretical vocational training and psychotherapeutic treatment. This problem need not be difficult to solve provided that work activity is included as part of the whole treatment process. It has been claimed that work can easily become an end in itself, where the economics of production become the dominating factor. Even though the economic aspects must not be ignored, they should not be allowed to become decisive. First and foremost work must be of such a nature that it exerts a personal influence upon the prisoner, allowing him in a natural way to experience and meet the demands for cooperation and consideration for others that he will run up against in society. If the work place - the factory or workshop - is arranged in the right way it will be the one part of the institution which differs least from conditions outside. There can be greater opportunities within the work situation than elsewhere in the institution to reach the prisoner and influence him in the right direction.

Compulsory work in the institutions has been criticized in various connections on the grounds that compulsion has no therapeutic effect. This opinion is mainly based on the belief that institutional work is independent of other treatment. This in turn presupposes that the prisoner makes a clear distinction between his position as an employee at one of the Correctional Administration's workshops and his total situation as a prisoner at an institution. Experience shows that this is rarely the case. Aggression and dislike directed toward some factor within the institution often lead to protests against some other factor. A survey a few years ago of fifty cases of refusal to work showed that only in one case was this form of protest caused by conditions at the place of work. It is unlikely that doing away with compulsory work would bring about the desired therapeutic effect: making work more attractive to the prisoner. Doing away with compulsory work or the responsibility for taking part in other similar activities would be more likely to bring about the opposite effect. Many prisoners who now keep their physical and mental health through working would probably sink into a passive, undemanding institutional existence.

Remuneration is very important to the prisoners. The majority have only their wages from the institution with which to buy cigarettes, coffee, magazines, books and other things to brighten up their life in the institution. Many are charged with maintenance or other debts. Many want to be able to send some money home or buy a present for when they travel home on furlough. Usually they must pay travel expenses themselves. Their needs are considerable, and it is extremely important that prisoners get a decent wage for their work.

Within the whole work sector workers are now paid according to achievement. The average hourly wage is just over 2 kronor (U.S. 42 cents). With a 40-hour week this means a weekly salary of approx. 80 kronor (\$17.00). However, weekly salaries of 100-150 kronor (\$21-\$32) are not unusual.

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Prisoners who study or take vocational training receive a study allowance of approx. 200 kronor (\$42) per month. They are also paid when they take part in meetings of their representative councils, work councils, etc.

Even though the remuneration for work can appear relatively good, the prisoner has little opportunity to save much toward his release. That is when he will meet real economic problems. The released prisoner often has debts in the form of back taxes, family maintenance, etc. Even if he gets a job immediately upon release it takes one or two weeks before he gets his first wages. To support himself and his family during that period he must turn either to what he has managed to save while in prison or to social welfare.

Labor-market Wages

Just recently an experiment has begun at the open prison at Tillberga, 75 miles west of Stockholm, whereby prisoners receive the same wages as are standard on the labor market outside. The Tillberga institution, with room for 120 prisoners, was built in 1963. It has modern factory facilities with an area of 86,400 sq.ft., where the prisoners manufacture prefabricated wooden houses or do mechanical work.

Piece-work wages and hourly wages using the labor market system are calculated on the basis of average wages in the private wood-products industry. During the experimental period the prisoners are exempt from income tax. Thus their wage scale corresponds to what a wood-products industry worker would earn after withholding tax is deducted. This means that "Tillberga wages" are estimated at 8-10 kronor per hour (\$1.70-\$2.10). Deductions for meals are made at the same rate as that for the personnel. After deductions for meals the prisoner is allowed 25% for his personal use. The remainder is set aside for savings and to cover his personal financial problems.

An important goal is to get the prisoner to clarify his present financial situation and to learn to plan his economy with an eye to the future. Thanks to the higher wages he earns at Tillberga he should be able to improve his situation prior to being released, for example by paying off his debts in whole or in part, or by paying rent on an apartment which he might otherwise forfeit. He should even try to save enough to support himself and his family during the first weeks after his release. The prisoner should plan his budget himself. He will be encouraged and given an opportunity to contact his creditors and, when necessary, make agreements with them on conditions for repayment. The guiding principle is that the prisoner himself should take the initiative and feel responsible for his future. The duty of institution personnel is to gain his confidence and assist him through advice and guidance.

What is hoped will be the main result of the Tillberga experiment is a reasonably good financial and social situation for the prisoner when he is released. This should have a favorable influence on his readjustment to society and reduce the risk of a relapse into crime.

Participation in the Tillberga experiment is voluntary. All prisoners in all institutions in the country have been informed of the experiment by means of a specially printed folder. They have been given an opportunity to request transfer to Tillberga, at the same time agreeing to accept the conditions set by the experiment.

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Independent Working Groups

The commonest form of remuneration in the work activity sector is the piece-work wage based on individual achievement. For some years, however, there have been experiments with a kind of group piece-work rate, which has proven superior to the individual piece-work system in several respects. Average wages, for example, are higher. Wage differentials are eliminated: everyone gets the same hourly wage. The system is easy to administer. But there are also disadvantages. Among other things there is an obvious danger that the man who cannot keep up with the rate at which the rest of the group work, thus reducing the group's income, will be rejected by the group.

An attempt to avoid, or at least reduce, this risk of rejection has been tried at one of the workshops in the closed Norrtälje prison since the beginning of 1971.

Part of the responsibility for the daily work in the workshop was handed over to the prisoners. They were divided up into three production groups, each group being responsible for its share of the total production. The group chooses a group leader who is responsible for seeing that necessary raw material is always available and that stipulated safety equipment is used. The group leader also has the deciding vote on work allocation within the group since it is assumed he knows his colleagues, their personality and work capacity better than the foreman.

This form of industrial democracy has proven successful. There has been a clear increase in the prisoners' interest in their work and in their rate of work, and a decrease in absenteeism. One way this is revealed is through production figures. During the experimental period production at the workshop has nearly tripled. Cooperation with the foremen is almost without friction. There is a strong feeling of group solidarity.

This experimental activity which has hitherto provided such positive results will be continued and will be introduced into the Tillberga prison and others.

Trade Union Collaboration Over the Walls

For a long time Swedish trade unions have had a positive attitude toward work in prisons. This has been expressed in many ways. Among other things the Correctional Administration has had a cooperation agreement with the Swedish Building Workers' Union since the mid-1960's for the training of young construction workers. The agreement provides that trainees will complete their theoretical work while serving their sentence and the union will take care of their continued practical training after their release.

A few years ago the question of trade union cooperation in connection with prisoners' work was raised by the Correctional Administration in talks with the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions. The result was a decision to set up special councils at a number of institutions, including Tillberga, for labor market and trade union questions. Each council consists of the prison governor, a foreman, a prisoner, a representative for the Labor Market Administration and a trade union representative.

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Trade Union Collaboration Over the Walls

For a long time Swedish trade unions have had a positive attitude towards work in prisons. This has been expressed in many ways. Among other things the Confederation of Trade Unions has had a representative organization with the Swedish Building Workers' Union since the mid-1950's. For the building of young correctional workshops, the organization provides that inmates will cooperate in their educational work which includes the structure and the inmates will take care of the equipment provided and will be in the picture.

A few years ago the question of trade union representation in correctional workshops was raised by the Confederation of Trade Unions. The Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions - the central body for all Swedish trade unions - has decided to set up special committees in all correctional institutions. The committees will have the task of representing the inmates' interests in the management of the institution, a permanent representative for the inmates' interests in the management of the institution and a trade union representative.

The council is an advisory organ. It can deal with all kinds of questions concerning work at the institution: organization and planning, the work environment, working conditions, pay, etc.

Those councils give the unions direct knowledge of what is going on in the institutions, and at the same time the prisoners have a chance to bring up matters of their place of work before an impartial representative of the working life.

Without any doubt the councils fill an important function in the treatment of criminals. They make an active contribution toward increasing the prisoners' interest in their work, and they open contact routes between the trade unions and the prisoners which are entirely of great value in the process of readaptation to society.